Dear Harold, Just got home from a pilgrimage to G
and Switzerland. Before unpacking and taking
chores, I thought of sending you this article
about JFK's assassination. Not a theory in different

'The bullet that killed JFK was fired by a Secret Service agent'

Occupation: Private eye

IN PERSON
BENNY MORRIS

The cable address on his business cards reads: "SLEUTH." Nicholas Beltrante, sixtyish, looking every inch an ex-cop, heads "Beltrante & Associates, Worldwide Professional Investigations" and has been called "the dean of American private eyes" by *The Washington Post*.

Beltrante, a former chief inspector of police in Washington, DC, spends most of his time overseeing the work of 22 associates. Occasionally, he takes on a case himself – charging $1,000 a day "plus expenses." He charges $50 an hour (plus expenses) for the work of each of his associates, who keep $20 an hour for themselves.

Beltrante personally takes only cases "with very large fees" or of "great interest." He is currently investigating, together with ballistics expert Howard Donahue, the 1963 assassination of President John Kennedy. "Howard came to me four years ago and said: 'I have only $500. But read my report.' " Beltrante was initially very sceptical. "I took it up very reluctantly. It seemed far-fetched. But the report convinced me."

The 40-page Donahue report "showed" that – on the basis of analysis of remaining metal fragments – the bullet that struck Kennedy in the back of the head and killed him "could not have been fired from Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle. The wrong calibre."

Donahue determined that the bullet in fact came from a "special weapon" held by one of the Secret Service agents who was in the car behind the president's. "What happened was that after the first shot or shots the president's car jerked to a halt. The Secret Service car then came to an abrupt stop – and the Secret Service agent accidentally let off a shot, the shot that killed the president. But the administration refused to admit this as it would have discredited the agency whose job it is to protect the president."

Beltrante relates – "we know this for a fact" – that several weeks after the assassination, while driving in Texas, President Johnson stopped his car and told the Secret Servicemen in the car following: "Keep further back. I don't want to be a victim of a Secret Service agent."

Beltrante says: "We have determined which agent in the Kennedy backup car was responsible. He was retired from the service a year and a half later. He suffered an emotional breakdown." Beltrante attributes the breakdown to the assassination. "He hasn't worked since. He lives like a recluse. He refuses to answer the telephone. We have him under surveillance." He declines to give the name because of "possible libel actions."

He says that the "media, especially in the U.S., misrepresent the profession of private investigator. Their life-style as portrayed on television is far-fetched, exaggerated. It makes the profession look ridiculous."

Nicholas Beltrante

Beltrante, of Italian stock (his name means "brave warrior"), says that the "treatment of private detectives in literature is more realistic." He names Sam Spade in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* as a good portrayal of the trade. Raymond Chandler? "Good, definitely." But Beltrante isn't up on contemporary detective fiction.

His firm handles 750-1,000 cases a year, mostly "background investigations of people or businesses. I generally don't ask clients, 'Why do you want this done?' "

Beltrante says there are around 100,000 private investigators working in the U.S., and perhaps 150,000 worldwide. "It is a growing profession. But only about 100 of them are good, capable, serious, a handful in each country. We know each other. In Israel there are four or five.

Nonetheless, Beltrante believes the profession generally is steadily gaining recognition and respectability. "The CIA and the Justice Department now occasionally use private investigators on a contract basis." Beltrante himself has been so used by the Federal Trade Commission.

Is there a danger that a client will hire him for illegal purposes?

"Look, the law allows us to investigate. I don't normally go into the 'whys.' " He himself usually handles "short trading" cases – in which people or companies covertly and usually illegally buy out businesses.

In 1972 Beltrante was hired by the Committee to Elect Senator George McGovern for President to investigate the Watergate burglary. "The burglary was on June 17, my birthday. A few days later, I was hired. I was asked to determine who was responsible and why."

Beltrante's investigation ran concurrently with several police and federal investigations. "At that time, politicians didn't trust the federal law enforcement agencies and the police. For example, I was asked by Congresswomen Bella Abzug to see if her office phones were tapped [by the authorities] – and they were. That's why I was hired."

After a four-month investigation, Beltrante "discovered that Gordon Liddy's men – some of whom it was later found were implicated in Watergate – had rented rooms near the offices of the Committee to Elect McGovern. We also discovered the McGovern committee had been infiltrated [by Liddy men] who wanted to get hold of their records. Yes, we had the names."

Beltrante recalls that *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward worked with him during the investigation. "We exchanged information, though I know they didn't give me everything they had, just as I didn't give them everything. They sent me the first signed copy of *All the President's Men*."

Beltrante "firmly believes that *Deep Throat* was no specific person or source; "it was a combination of sources and contacts whom Bernstein and Woodward called Deep Throat."

Beltrante, who hails from Atlantic City, is president-elect of the Council of International Investigators, which has a ceiling of 300 investigators.